Defining elements of the strategy for the introduction of blended learning in VET schools

Strategy framework

BlendVET

Blended learning in vocational education and training

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April 2022

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1. INTRODUCTION

This document is part of the BlendVET project, funded by the EEA Grants and corresponding Slovenian contribution. The main aim of the document is to frame **the strategy and strategic leadership** for the implementation of the blended learning derived from the *Defining elements for the blended learning and teachers' pedagogical and digital competencies (Radovan, Meden, Makovec Radovan, 2022)* and other projects' starting points.

Every school improvement project (including BlendVET) is based on some sort of strategy. Strategic planning, implementation and evaluation are processes that are generic to the education development activities and include certain typical stages involving elements carried out in a sequence. For strategy to succeed, agile and inclusive school level leadership is indispensable. That includes managing changes in the school by including all participants in all stages of the strategic process. However, each institution (school) has its own particular context and therefore also interpretation of the approaches and activities in strategic management and leadership.

In the context of the BlendVET project, the main characteristic is derived from the fact that it deals with the specifics of vocational education and training (VET). Even though the general learning and teaching principles that are at stake are the same as in other areas of education, the focus of schools included in the project is vocational part of education and the specifics that derive from different forms of training, among which the work-based training is prevailing. Consequently, the VET schools while designing the strategy should consider involvement of in-company trainers (mentors), alignment of the elements of strategy and action plan (and in case of BlendVET project also elements of blended learning) to the work-based learning and the circumstances of the involved companies.

While designing the strategy and following generic rules of strategic development of schools, the area of the development sets the tone to the whole process. This means that in each stage of designing the strategy and its introduction the school should follow the main characteristics of blended learning as defined in the BlendVET project.

The definition of blended learning used in the BlendVET project is as follows. Blended learning is (Radovan, Meden, Makovec Radovan, 2022) as a didactic concept and practice that combines face-to-face and on-site teaching/learning with the teaching/learning using digital tools (on or off-line). In blended learning the use of digital tools for teaching and learning is planned in advance to assure the best possible combination of different approaches to reach specific learning objectives. Digital tools used need to enable students' engagement, ease of use, and interpersonal contact. Blended learning has transformative potential linked to pedagogical innovation, including the development of students' reflective practice, and the promotion of (international) collaboration between students. Blended learning is also about the development of students' digital competencies, differentiated instruction across a group of students according to students' needs and flexible modes of learning. In the context of the BlendVET project, the school strategy should reflect the pedagogical aspect (student-centred teaching methods approach) as a starting point when introducing the use of digital learning technology as a focus point of the project itself.

Hence, this document strives to align and frame the starting points regarding strategy and strategic leadership with regard to the blended learning in vocational education and training (VET) schools

involved in the BlendVET project in order to set a clearer direction, a more harmonised approach and support/training for the schools involved.

2. THE SUCCESS OF THE STRATEGY HEAVILY DEPENDS ON STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Numerous experts (e.g. Davies 2006) claim the development and success of the strategy heavily depends on the processes, people involved and school culture and context, and NOT on plans. Strategic processes mostly rely on strategic leadership (team). Strategic leadership team should make sure that ALL participants (especially teachers involved in the project) are included in decision making at ALL STAGES and elements of the strategic process (i.e. strategic intent, needs analysis, setting strategic objectives, preparing an action plan…).

At the very beginning the following leadership decisions are to be brought:

- o Who are members of the strategic leadership team for blended learning?
- o What is the role of already existing teams within school (e.g. school improvement teams, quality teams, self-evaluation teams, department teams…) and how do these relate to the BlendVET project's team?
- o What are the exact roles of the blended learning strategic leadership team? Who is doing what?
- o What are other people's roles (e.g. teachers, technology support staff, other stakeholders involved)?

Strategic leadership team for blended learning creates structures and processes which **engage individuals** within the school. This engagement should be primarily participative in nature and consists of four (4) elements (Davies 2006):

1. strategic **conversations** (consensus building, understanding how staff could make things happen, common vocabulary, building reflection, keeping people involved);
2. strategic **participation** (information, consultation, participation);
3. strategic **motivation** (depends on trust in the leadership, sense of purpose - where are we going and why, feeling valued, feeling that their contribution is important and recognised, feeling that their contribution can make a difference);
4. strategic **capability** (the ability to see the current situation of the school in a wider context, the ability to recognize and utilize change, to envisage an improved future for the school)

CAPABILITY and CAPACITY in strategic leadership »*deal with levels of knowledge and understanding, which allow individuals to adapt to change and build new ways of working … abilities and attitudes of individuals to develop creative and meaningful solutions to enhance and not just replicate current practice*« (Davies 2006: 15). One of the essential **capacity building strategies is TRAINING**. Teachers, who are going to be involved in the introduction of blended learning should be trained (and decisions brought) in accordance with the elements of blended learning. In the BlendVET project those are presented in the document *Defining elements for the blended learning and teachers' pedagogical and digital competencies (Radovan, Meden, Makovec Radovan, 2022)*

3. STAGES OF THE BLENDED LEARNING STRATEGY

The overall strategy always aligns with the **cyclic process** in school, which can be termed school improvement process, quality assurance process, self-evaluation process etc. No matter what it is called, it normally consists of a **three (3) stage process, i.e. planning (1), implementing, monitoring and reviewing (2), evaluating and reporting (3).** Each of the stages is further divided into several parts, usually referred to as **»strategic elements**«. Further below each of the stages and their elements are described more in detail.

The following graphic represents an equal importance of each stage and their interconnectedness, but not necessarily the time needed to be dedicated to each of the stages. Even though school should follow the three stages and its strategic elements in consecutive order as suggested below, at the same time it should have in mind their interdependencies and anticipate the need to reevaluate already defined elements during the whole process but especially in the planning stage.
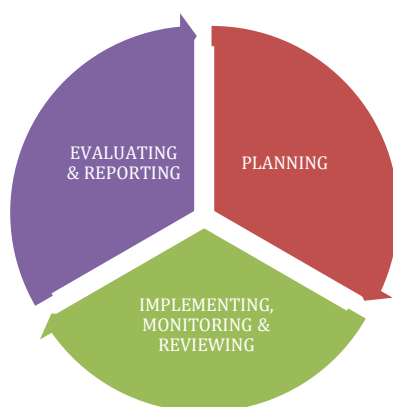
2.1. Planning (Stage 1)

In practice the planning stage consists of **five (5) elements** followed one after another (see below).

Order of elements	Names of the elements	Description of the elements
Element 1	**STRATEGIC INTENT** or main/major strategic aim in the context of introducing blended learning in VET	The strategic intent refers to **setting/establishing the key area of achievement and attention** where precise articulation of detail is not possible. It provides consistency to short-term actions, while leaving room for reinterpretation as new opportunities emerge. By defining it, the school is forced to be imaginative and inventive in seeking new ways to create capability and achieve the strategic objectives defined in the next stage. A school focusing on the strategic intent undertakes **a future awareness of and commitment to a challenge in a specific area represented by defined strategic intent**. With the

		BlendVET project the strategic intent has somehow already been narrowed down to some extent to the topic of the introduction of blended learning in the context of VET and especially to the pedagogical aspects of its introduction as a focus point of the BlendVET project.
Element 2	**NEEDS ANALYSIS** for the introduction of blended learning in VET	Any set of strategic objectives always begins with an **analysis of the current state**. Findings and options are formulated and appraised, thus providing the school's policy orientation. This element is a sort of a **diagnostic stage** in which the school collects data on various **contextual determining factors which will enable and/or hinder the implementation process of the blended learning strategic intent and objectives**. This process is a review and examination of how the things pertaining to the chosen strategic objectives **meet the school's, teachers' and students' needs**. Usually it is run in the form of a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities) in combination with other evaluation or self-evaluation tools (survey, focus group, benchmarking, peer review etc.). The process raises awareness of the state-of-the art situation, critical issues and challenges regarding the strategic objectives.
Element 3	**STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES** of the introduction of the blended learning in VET	Strategic objectives refer to **a breakdown of the strategic intent into minor/smaller aims**. The strategic objectives **shall answer the question what specifically wants to be achieved with the strategic intent (introduction of blended learning in VET)**. In practice we are seeking a range of specific benefits for different main stakeholders, frequently also labelled as levels of strategic **objectives to be considered, i.e. school level, teacher level and student level.** Therefore, the strategic objectives have to be directed towards all three levels separately. It is advised to explore/strive to achieve/aim at least one strategic objective per level. At the same time, on the practical level the strategic objectives should be as concrete and precise as possible and limited (usually to maximum 3) only to those that are crucial and manageable to pursue in the defined and limited time of the strategic cycle.
Element 4	**ACTIVITIES** supporting the strategic objectives leading to the introduction of blended learning in VET	This element is the preparation for implementation and answers the question as to **how the school is going to meet** or **what the school is going to do to achieve the set strategic objectives**. Activities are a translation of set strategic objectives into operational terms. Activities also need to be set in relation to time frame, i.e. when are we going to do what, and staff involved, i.e. who is going to do what.
Element 5	**INDICATORS** indicating the strategic objectives	By **indicators and measures intended strategic objectives/improvements can and will be measured**

	leading to the introduction of blended learning in VET have been met/achieved	(quantitatively or qualitatively). Within this element the school is striving to **answer how they are going to know that changes have occurred and the strategic objectives have been met**. It strongly relates to the next two strategic stage processes, i.e. monitoring and implementation, and evaluation. In order to successfully monitor, assess, evaluate and judge whether any and what changes have occurred, formative and summative targets need to be set.

For the school to be able to operationalize and implement each of the elements, the following **questions** have **to be considered, dealt with, thought of, answered and described** as separate parts of a whole **school document *Strategy and action plan for blended learning in VET at the XY school***.

STRATEGIC INTENT	● Is the strategic intent as should align with the definition of blended learning used in the BlendVET project and with the focus on the pedagogical aspect? ● How is the strategic intent for the introduction of blended learning in VET connected with the school's mission, values and other school development priority areas? ● What school level documents (e.g. annual plan, school development plan, school education plan, quality improvement plan) support the strategic intent of the introduction of blended learning in VET? ● What international and national education policies schools' strategic intent is connected to?
NEEDS ANALYSIS	● What is the school's understanding of blended learning in VET? What do teachers, in-company trainers, students and support staff know about blended learning in general? ● How does this understanding relate to the BlendVET project definition of blended learning in VET and what needs to be done to align the two? ● Which model, models or their combination of blended learning is appropriate for the school? ● What has the school already been carrying out/implementing regarding the strategic intent? ● Which are the advantages and disadvantages (strengths and weaknesses) related to blended learning in our VET school and companies our students are involved in? ● What obstacles does the school see on the way? ● What opportunities does the introduction of blended learning in VET offer for the individuals included and the whole school? What can this lead to in the future? ● Which instruments are going to/can be used to measure the present state (e. g. SELFIE, other national/local/school provided instruments or data available in this area)[1]?

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[1] In the context of the BlendVET project a set of activities combining project level need analysis and school level self-evaluation was designed and implemented (set of questions for interviews with

	- What are/can be the current quantitative and qualitative points/values of departure of what the school wants to achieve? - What is the school's capacity (knowledge and skills) regarding 4 different driving forces of blended learning in VET: technological, temporal, spatial and **especially pedagogical** as the focus of the BlendVET project? - What is needed to successfully support the introduction and implementation of the strategic intent in terms of - teacher/in-company trainer digital and pedagogical competencies and professional development, - school technology available and students' access to technology and their digital competencies, - school technology support staff (knowledge, abilities, availability), (refer to BlendVET project documents for further aspects)?
STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES	- What exactly do we want to achieve by introducing/enhancing blended learning in VET in general and especially in the context of the pedagogical aspect of blended learning in VET? - What strategic objectives would we like to/be able to/are we capable of following/promoting at different levels? How do we know that? - Why exactly these strategic objectives? What are the reasons behind this? - How many strategic objectives are we able to cover/handle (within our context)? - Do strategic objectives considered depend on each other? Which strategic objective needs to be considered before another? - To what extent do strategic objectives depend on the school's context and culture? - Who is going to be committed to these strategic objectives? - Which VET programs, modules, classes are going to be committed to the pilot project?
ACTIVITIES	- What does the school (school, teachers, in-company trainers, students) have to do to achieve the chosen strategic objectives? - Which activities would most support/be most appropriate for the strategic objectives at each level? - What is the school going to be doing/carrying with the teachers and students in supporting the achievement of the strategic objectives? How will school involve in-company mentors? - Who is going to devote themselves to each strategic objective and to what extent (e.g. all school teachers or individual teachers/students, (un)voluntarily, in one or several subjects/modules)?
INDICATORS	- What will be different at the end (reached strategic intent) at the school level, teacher level and student level? - What will the school, teachers, in-company trainers and students be doing differently (or know) so that the school will know that they

school leadership, on-line survey for teachers and for students, following the support activities for schools to derive key messages as a starting point for the designing the strategic objectives).

		were successful in achieving the strategic objectives? ● What data does the school need to gather to know/identify that they have been progressing and achieving the strategic objectives?

The school document as such can be titled as *Strategy and action plan for blended learning in VET at the XY school*. Further below a **sample document framework** is suggested.

SCHOOL STRATEGIC INTENT:

In the line of the BlendVET project the strategic intent of schools is dealing with the introduction of blended learning in VET with the specific focus on the pedagogical competencies of teachers.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES	**School level**	**Examples of possible school level topics for strategic objectives**: ● promote pedagogical competencies of teachers; ● promote student-centred approach to teaching; ● promote students active learning; ● determine which learning objectives are suitable to pursue with the instruction using digital technology; ● promote digital literacy; ● promote critical thinking; ● enhance more flexible ways of working at the school level; ● improve digital literacy skills of students and teachers at the school level; ● etc.
	Teacher level	**Examples of possible teacher level topics for strategic objectives**: ● enhance personalised instruction; ● enhance collaborative teaching approach; ● increase the use of the assessment for learning; ● design the assessment of learning approaches using digital tools; ● improve course delivery in a more vivid and creative ways; ● broaden, extend and deepen communications and collaboration with students; ● etc.
	Student level	**Examples of possible student level topics for strategic objectives**: ● enhance students' autonomy and flexibility of work; ● enhance students' intrinsic motivation for learning and engaged learning; ● improve students' teamwork skills; ● improve students' self-regulating learning skills; ● improve students' digital literacy, competencies and/or skills; ● improve students' activity and participation in the learning; ● etc.

NEEDS ANALYSIS (a description answering the questions under the heading *Needs analysis* above)

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES **What do we want to achieve?**	**ACTIVITIES** **What are we going to do?**	**INDICATORS** **How are we going to know that we have reached the target?**	**WHO AND WHEN** **Who is going to work on it?** **What is the deadline?**
Strategic objective 1	Activity 1: Activity 2: Activity 3: …	Indicator 1: Indicator 2: Indicator 3: …	

Strategic **objective 2**	Activity 1: Activity 2: Activity 3: …	Indicator 1: Indicator 2: Indicator 3: …	
Strategic **objective 3**	Activity 1: Activity 2: Activity 3: …	Indicator 1: Indicator 2: Indicator 3: …	

2.2. Implementing, monitoring and reviewing (Stage 2)

This stage is necessary for following the implementation and progress of the proposed action plan. In response to this stage, the following questions need to be considered:

1. Is it happening what the school wants and has set?
2. Is the school doing/implementing what has been planned?
3. What and how exactly is the school monitoring, reviewing and analysing the process?
4. How does the school know it has (been) achieving/achieved what it has been striving for?

Monitoring and reviewing refer to processes, which consist of »*measuring the status of objectives and/or activities/strategies against expected targets that allow some sort of comparison*« (Chang 2006). This implies that in the planning stage there have to be some **measures/indicators that can enable the judgement of the progression and end evaluation**. In order to successfully do so the school needs to plan data collection on the basis of which the indicators/measures will be judged.[2] It is important to notice that the **monitoring and data** must **refer to two (2) different levels**, i.e.:

o level of activity/strategy implementation (teacher level) – How will we know that the activities have been implemented and to what extent? **Whether and how well the planned activities are being carried out and completed?**

o level of students' achievement of strategic objectives (student level) – **How will we know that the students are progressing/have been successful** while the activities have been implemented by the teacher?

TYPES OF DATA and	numbers, words, photos/pictures

[2] In the context of the BlendVET project some of the indicators set by the schools may match the pilot evaluation.

INDICATORS	quantitative (e.g. frequency of meetings, number of teachers/students involved, number of learning methods and blended learning activities used, growth rates, adoption of blended learning models) and qualitative (e.g. level of participation, opinions and satisfaction, self-analysis, attitudinal and behavioural changes) direct (directly observable change resulting from activities) vs indirect (not directly observable but connected) indicators Main questions: **What data are available for the indicators? How good are they? What exactly do they tell?**
WAYS OF DATA COLLECTION	asking (e.g. questionnaires, interviews, focus groups), observing (e.g. observations, shadowing, critical friendship), sorting/prioritising, collecting (e.g. document analysis, portfolio), dairying, (e.g. learning logs), enacting (e.g. role play, story telling), imaging, (picture, photo and video evaluation) … Main question: **Which data collection techniques/instruments best support each and/or more indicators?**
WAYS OF MONITORING (DATA AND PROGRESSION)	regular professional (project) meetings, reflections (oral & written), teacher professional group discussion, critical friendship, mentoring, tutoring Main question: **How well are we monitoring the progress collaboratively as a learning community (and not only on an individual teacher level)?**

(e.g. Chang 2006, MacBeath et al 2000, Earl 2012, Brejc et al 2014, Stringer 2008)

Following the action plan from the stage 1 the school also needs to prepare a **monitoring and data collection plan**. One has to bear in mind that the monitoring and reviewing plan is subject to change; in case anything happens, changes during the school year, the plan can be revised and updated.

2.3. Evaluating and reporting (Stage 3)

Monitoring and analysis on thorough data collection provide a basis for the final evaluation. Evaluation should be understood as a **comprehensive examination of data gathered in relation to the strategic objectives set at the very beginning**. Evaluation (and final report) help decision makers to learn lessons and apply them in future school directions. In the evaluation the school shall answer:

- Have the strategic objectives been achieved and to what extent?
- What do data and results tell us?
- What decisions can we bring on the basis of the evaluation for future directions?

The **evaluation** shall include the following **aspects** (sf. Brejc et al 2014):

RESULTS, RELEVANCE, EFFECTIVENESS	How well have the activities been prepared and implemented (quality)?
LEARNING AT THE SCHOOL	To what extent have the activities met the identified needs?

AND TEACHER LEVEL	Has anything important changed and to what extent can this be attributed to the strategic intent of the introduction of blended learning? How important are the results with regard to the staff and students involved, school, other stakeholders (e.g. employers)?
INVESTMENT, EFFICIENCY	What has worked and what hasn't? What are unexpected positive and negative consequences?
FUTURE DIRECTIONS	Have the activities been resource (staff, material, finance, time, technology) efficient? Have the resources been used in line with the plan? Could the resources have been used/exploited better?
SUSTAINABILITY	To what extent have the activities influenced long-term and sustainable changes in actions and behaviours of the involved?

Each evaluation should be reported to a certain extent. Usually it is an »**evaluation report**« or »project report« that serves as the final documents. The report is primarily prepared by the (project) leadership team, who also together with the teaching staff decides on the form and way of reporting.

Possible sample report structure and content

1	SCHOOL INTRODUCTION (including only info relevant and related to the strategic intent)
2	PLANNING, IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING OF THE STRATEGIC INTENT AND OBJECTIVES (describing the processes)
3	RESULTS of the STRATEGIC INTENT AND OBJECTIVES (describing what has been achieved and to what extent; what influenced the achievement of strategic objectives; what are the exact results at the level of school; teacher level and student level; how effective was the use of resources)
4	FUTURE GUIDELINES AND ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN (describing essential decisions and conclusions brought on the basis of the results and achievements regarding all levels (teacher, student, school); what could have been done better in the future; how is the school going to develop regarding blended learning in the future)
5	APPENDICES

4. REFERENCES

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